DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 301 910 CS 506 499

AUTHOR Salmon, Charles T.; Oshagan, Hayg
TITLE Community Size, Perceptions of Majority Opinion and Opinion Expression.
PUB DATE Jul 88
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (71st, Portland, OR, July 2-5, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; Community Attitudes; *Community Influence; Community Size; Mass Media Effects; Models; *Public Opinion; Public Relations; *Self Expression
IDENTIFIERS *Communications Behavior; Opinion Polls

ABSTRACT

A study examined structural determinants of opinion expression by merging two theoretical perspectives: the "spiral of silence" model advanced by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, and the structural approach to communication research offered by Phillip Tichenor, George Donohue, and Clarice Olien. The study also distinguished between different forms of opinion expression in terms of: 1) the degree to which the expression is public, and 2) the degree to which feedback is immediate and potentially hostile. Subjects, 478 mass communications students at a midwestern university, were asked their opinions on two social issues, the banning of pornography and the passage of a mandatory seat-belt law. They were also asked about their perceptions of majority opinion in their hometowns and their willingness to express their opinions on these two topics in their hometowns. Results showed significant differences in willingness to express opinion in smaller communities, i.e., those in which the media serve a predominantly distributive function, than in larger, more pluralistic ones, i.e., those in which the media serve more of a feedback function in response to the presence of diverse social and political groups. Specifically, perceived congruity with majority opinion is a significant predictor of two forms of opinion expression in small, but not large, communities. Results suggest that "fear of confrontation" in smaller communities may inhibit opinion expression to a greater extent than the "fear of isolation" mechanism proposed by Noelle-Neumann. (Three figures and 2 tables of data are included; 23 references are attached.) (Author/RAE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED301910

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Hayg Oshagan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Community Size, Perceptions of Majority Opinion and Opinion Expression

Charles T. Salmon

Assistant Professor

and

Hayg Oshagan

Doctoral Candidate

School of Journalism & Mass Communication

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Madison, WI 53706

CS506497

A "Top 3" paper in the public relations division, AEJMC, Portland, OR

ABSTRACT

Community Size, Perceptions of Majority Opinion
and Opinion Expression

Charles T. Salmon and Hayg Oshagan
School of Journalism and Mass Communication
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison, WI 53706

This study merges two theoretical perspectives, the "spiral of silence" model advanced by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, and the structural approach to communication research offered by Phillip Tichenor, George Donohue and Clarice Olien, to examine structural determinants of opinion expression. The study also distinguishes between different forms of opinion expression in terms of: (1) the degree to which the expression is public; and (2) the degree to which feedback is immediate and potentially hostile.

Respondents, students in a large mass communication course at a midwestern university, were asked their opinions on two social issues, the banning of pornography and the passage of a mandatory seat-belt law, their perceptions of majority opinion in their hometowns, as well as their willingness to express those opinions in their hometowns.

The results show significant differences in willingness to express opinions in smaller communities, i.e., those in which the media serve a predominantly distributive function, than in larger, more pluralistic ones, i.e., those in which the media serve more of a feedback function in response to the presence of diverse social and political groups. Specifically, perceived congruity with majority opinion is a significant predictor of two forms of opinion expression in small, but not large, communities. The results suggest that "fear of confrontation" in smaller communities may inhibit opinion expression to a greater extent than the "fear of isolation" mechanism proposed by Noelle-Neumann. Implications of these results are discussed for planners of issues-management campaigns.

Community Size, Perceptions of Majority Opinion and Opinion Expression

Introduction

The concept of public opinion has been central to the practice and study of public relations since the early writings of Edward L. Bernays (1923) on the "crystallizing" of public opinion. The most prestigious honor bestowed by PRSA for excellence in public relations, the Silver Anvil, is awarded annually for an organization's ability to "forge public opinion." Yet despite the centrality of the concept to the field, little theory building of public opinion has occurred in recent years, and the area has been described as theoretically barren (Blumer, 1948; Goldner, 1971). In large measure, this is due to the overwhelming and uncritical acceptance of the dominant model of public opinion research, namely that public opinion is merely the arithmetic sum of individuals' opinion on an issue of public importance (Blumer, 1948; Pavlik and Salmon, 1984).

The present paper describes the merger of two research traditions, Noelle-Neumann's "spiral of silence" theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1973; 1974; 1977; 1979; 1981; 1984) and Tichenor, Donohue and Olien's structural model of mass communication (Olien et al., 1968; Donohue, et al., 1973; Tichenor et al., 1973; Tichenor et al., 1980), to provide a theoretical framework for understanding public opinion processes. Specifically, this paper examines structural influences on individuals' willingness to express opinions on two social issues, the propriety of the sale of pornographic materials, and passage of a proposed mandatory seat-belt law in the state. In both cases, the issues have been the subject of intense public relations efforts by interest groups, businesses and government seeking to manage the economic, political and social environments in which they operate.

The "Spiral of Silence" Model

One of the few attempts to introduce theory into the otherwise atheoretical area of public opinion research has been made by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, a noted German pollster and political scientist. Noelle-Neumann's model is predicated upon the work of the German sociologist Tonnies, who considered public opinion to be a mechanism of social control: "[Public opinion] demands consent or at least compels silence, or abstention from contradiction" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 44). The model can be divided into three distinct segments, referring to elements of the mass media environment, individuals' scanning of information environment, and implications for social change.

To start with, Noelle-Neumann argues, the mass media are ubiquitous and consonant; that is, mass media messages are virtually inescapable in contemporary society, and the ideological origin of these messages is largely homogeneous. Media professionals, Noelle-Neumann claims, tend to be disproportionately liberal in their political orientations. This ideological preference is manifested in news content, thus allowing journalists to be in the vanguard of social change through constructing a social reality that is more liberal in appearance than in substance. The combination of these two forces creates opinion environments which envelop individuals in society. Because most persons have an innate fear of isolation or ostracization, she contends, they constantly scan the information environment to determine which opinions are popular and which are not. The most important environment is that structured by the ubiquitous mass media, meaning that the media exert a powerful potential influence over the cognitions of individuals. If an individual perceives that his or her opinion is shared by the majority, he or she will feel sufficiently confident to express that opinion in public without fear of social sanction. Conversely, if an individual senses that his or her opinion is unpopular, he or she will remain silent. Implications of this process are that, over time, popular opinions will increasingly dominate social discourse; policy decision-makers, in turn, will base their decisions on those opinions

that are expressed, not withheld. The importance of this model for public relations practitioners is obvious; to the extent that campaign planners can control an information environment and make it appear that their viewpoint or opinion dominates, they can create a self-perpetuating system in which their opinion actually will become dominant over time. This is the rationale for the organizing and staging of newsworthy "events" that draw media attention, thereby granting legitimacy to holders of a particular issue position and implicitly demonstrating that individuals who similarly hold that issue opinion are not isolated in society.

The static version of this model, i.e., that individuals perceived and are influenced by opinion climates at any one point in time, has been subjected to a number of empirical tests, mostly in West Germany and the United States, with mixed support (e.g., Glynn and McLeod, 1984; Bergen, 1985; Rucinski et al., 1987; Salmon and Neuwirth, 1987; Salmon and Rucinski, 1988). Based upon these studies, there is reason to believe that perceptions of majority opinion have a limited--but statistically significant--influence on willingness to express opinions publicly for some issues. On the other hand, little empirical data address the dynamic version of the model, i.e., the extent to which holders of a minority issue position are silenced over time. In addition, the model has been subjected to several critiques which have raised a number of questions regarding conceptual and operational considerations (e.g., Salmon and Kline, 1985; Glynn and McLeod, 1985). Summarizing research on the topic, Salmon and Neuwirth (1987) concluded that opinion expression appears to be a function of the issue itself, the form of expression required, issue knowledge and involvement, perceptions of majority opinion, and demographics.

The last set of influences, demographic characteristics, has been found to be a significant predictor of expression by Noelle-Neumann (1974), who concluded that individuals of higher levels of education and those from urban rather than rural communities were among those most likely to speak out. This latter serendipitous

finding, which has not been explored by any research in either West Germany or the United States, suggests that certain structural variables may be important to an understanding of the conditions under which individuals will be more or less likely to express opinions on controversial issues.

The Structural Model of Mass Communication

Tichenor, Donohue and Olien, social scientists at the University of Minnesota, have developed a research program that is relevant to the study of structural variables and opinion expression. Their model is predicated upon the notion that the mass media represent one subsystem among many within the larger systemic framework, rather than an independent "Fourth Estate" operating in the absence of constraints or pressures from without. The media serve a dual control function in this context, providing both feedback control and distribution control. In the former case, the media basically provide the mechanism through which various subsystems communicate with other subsystems within the overall system. In the latter case, the media serve as a disseminator of information on the public agenda, a public record of community concerns and opinions. Through the interaction of these two functions, Tichenor, Donohue and Olien argue, the media help define social norms through coverage of the positions of various subsystems.

The degree to which one or both functions is emphasized is a function of community size (Donohue et al., 1973). In a less complex system, the media tend to act more in a distributive role, whereas in more complex systems, the media provide more of a feedback function. In large measure, this is because more complex systems are, by nature, more heterogeneous, consisting of more and more diverse community power structures (Olien, et al, 1968). Because the media selectively reflect concerns of dominant power groups, media coverage of community disputes necessarily will be greater in larger communities, i.e., those in which more competing groups co-exist

(Tichenor, Donohue and Olien, 1980).

In other words, community size in large measure determines the degree of reporting of conflict on a controversial issue and, as a result, the extent to which various community groups will be made aware of the opinions of others in the community. Because smaller communities tend to be more homogeneous than larger ones, social norms are more clearly established and more readily apparent to residents. Further, the reporting of conflict tends to be limited in smaller communities as a result of gatekeeping decisions by editors who often play a "community boosterism" role (Edelstein and Schulz, 1963; Olien, et al., 1968). This editorial process may imply the presence of a consensus or dominant norm which, in turn, community residents may sense. Vidich and Bensman (1968, p. 303), in their classic participant observation study of small-town life, essentially provide the linkage between the inculcation of social norms described by Noelle-Neumann in the small community setting:

> *There is silent recognition among members of the community that facts and ideas which are disturbing to the accepted system of illusions are not be be verbalized.... Instead, the social mores of the small town at every opportunity demand that only those facts and ideas which support the dreamwork of everyday life are to be verbalized and selected out for emphasis and repetition.*

In contrast, editorial decisionmaking in larger communities may suggest the lack of consensus or dominant norms, thereby allowing residents greater latitude in expressing opinions.

Hypotheses

Merging the two theoretical perspectives described above, one would expect the following:

1. Because opinion environments are peculiar to the specific system and media that contribute to formulation of perceptions, they can be described as distinguishable in an absolute sense. More importantly for Noelle-Neumann's model, however, is the

point that individuals perceive differences in the opinion environments of different communities to which they have varying degrees of orientation.

2. Larger, more complex systems contain greater diversity of viewpoints as a function of containing more and more diverse social groups. Further, the media in reporting conflict in larger communities reflect this lack of consensus in reportage. Thus, community size is expected to be related to perceptions of opinion climates, as well as to certainty of individuals' judgments regarding the constitution of these climates.

3. Consistent with Noelle-Neumann's model, perceptions of opinion congruity, i.e., the degree to which one's opinion is perceived as being consistent with majority opinion in a community, affects one's willingness to express opinions on a controversial issue.

4. Community size and perceptions of congruity interact in that perceptions of opinion congruity in the small community, a system characterized by greater face-to-face interaction and more clearly specified norms, will lead to greater willingness to express opinions. In the larger, more heterogeneous communities, opinion congruence is not expected to be as important a predictor of opinion expression because of the existence of diverse social groups which, in effect, legitimize the holding of "minority" opinions. Again, the greater homogeneity of smaller communities should translate into greater pressure to conform or remain silent.

Methodology

Four hundred and seventy-eight university students were surveyed regarding their willingness to express opinions on two social issues, regulation of the availability of pornographic materials and a proposed mandatory seat-belt law. In terms of issue characteristics, pornography is an "older" issue in the sense that it has received media attention for a number of years, whereas the mandatory seat-belt issue is more recent. Further, the issue of pornography is more likely to elicit considerations of morality,

sensitivity or discomfortune when an individual considers the ramifications of discussing the issue publicly. Both of these issue dimensions are expected to result in different patterns of opinion expression. The students were enrolled in a large introductory public relations class at a large midwestern university, and originally were from communities scattered throughout the midwest and, to a lesser extent, other regions of the country. Since the goal of this study is to compare effects of structural influences on decisions regarding opinion expression--rather than to establish specific opinions or level of support for a specific issue--there is no reason to expect that generalizability is limited by the use of students in this study. The only caveat that should be kept in mind with the data is that previous studies (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Salmon and Neuwirth, 1987) have established that level of education is related to greater overall willingness to express opinions and by using college students in this study we have essentially overestimated that behavior relative to its prevalence in the general population. But the relative contributions of various predictor variables should be generalizable in an ordinal sense without contamination.

Measurement

Personal Opinion and Opinion Congruence. Subjects were asked their opinion on two issues and then asked to estimate the opinion of: (1) most students in the university; (2) most residents of the community in which the university is located; and (3) most residents of their hometown. For each opinion item, a semantic differential format was used in which extreme opinion statements anchored each end of the five-point scale. From these items, congruity scores were calculated, with a "1" being assigned to those individuals who perceived themselves as being in the minority, a "2" being assigned to those individuals who perceived themselves as neither in the minority nor majority, and a "3" being assigned to those who perceived themselves as in the majority. Further, subjects were asked how certain they were about their assessments of each of the three opinion climates.

Opinion Expression. Because previous research has demonstrated that differences in forms of opinion expression are inherently considered more or less attractive by individuals (Salmon and Neuwirth, 1987; Salmon and Rucinski, 1988), three forms of expression were used in this study. Subjects were asked how willing they would be to: (1) participate in a demonstration with people who share their opinion on the issue; (2) wear a pin or button expressing their opinion on the issue; and (3) be interviewed by a TV reporter with camera and microphone for airing on the TV newscast. For all three modes of expression, subjects rated their willingness to participate in these activities in their hometown. These three forms of expression can be distinguished conceptually in terms of: (1) the degree to which each form of expression is public; and (2) the degree to which feedback will be immediate and perhaps unpleasant. "Publicness" of opinion expression is crucial in terms of Noelle-Neumann's theory; on the other hand, public expression in and of itself does not imply fear of isolation or censure. For example, expressing an opinion to a TV reporter will ultimately result in a highly public form of opinion expression, yet one for which feedback will be delayed, if it occurs at all (i.e., it will occur only if others view the interview, recognize the interviewee and contact that individual). In contrast, wearing a pin or button is limited in terms of its "publicness," yet will often result in immediate feedback. Participating in a demonstration is associated with a higher probability of confrontation or open conflict, yet may be considered less public than participating in a TV interview.

Structural variables. Structural variables were measured in the following manner. Community size was measured with a five-point scale, with points corresponding to: (1) less than 1,000 persons; (2) 1,000 to 10,000 persons; (3) 10,000 to 40,000 persons; (4) 40,000 to 100,000 persons; and (5) over 100,000 persons. Additional variables measured include: number of years lived in hometown [(1) less than 5; (2) 6 to 10; (3) 11 to 15; (4) 16 to 20; (5) more than 21] and year in college.

Results

Perceptions of Opinion Climates

The first question of interest, and a point of theoretical departure, was whether individuals could distinguish between different climates of opinions. To test this, a series of t-tests was conducted comparing perceptions of majority opinion among students on campus, the community in which the university is located, and the subjects' hometown communities. Presented first are data on the issue of pornography. Excluding those cases for which the university community was a subject's hometown (64 cases), significant differences were found between perceptions of the majority opinion among university students and university-community residents ($t=-17.58$, $p < .01$), between university students and hometown residents ($t=-16.75$, $p < .01$), and between university-community residents and hometown residents ($t=-2.45$, $p < .05$). For the issue of mandatory seat-belts, there were significant differences between perceptions of majority opinion among university students and university-community residents ($t=16.58$, $p < .01$) and between university students and hometown residents ($t=15.21$, $p < .01$). There were no significant differences in opinion perceptions between university-community residents and hometown residents.

In general, the data provide support for the notion that individuals are capable of at least estimating differences in opinion climates. In this particular case, subjects consistently evaluated the opinion climate among students as the most liberal, followed by the opinion climate of the university-community. Across all community sizes, the hometown community consistently was viewed as more conservative than the other two opinion climates. Possibly, this is due to the particular nature of the university community in general (both U.W. students and Madison residents), which tends to be somewhat liberal and permissive relative to others in the state and region.

Community Size, Opinion and Opinion Expression

The first question to be addressed in this section is whether the size of one's home community is related to opinion position, with the expectation that in larger, more heterogeneous communities there will be greater tolerance of differing opinions and more support for individual freedoms. In contrast, it was expected that in smaller towns, with greater emphasis on social cohesion and greater population homogeneity, there would be less acceptance of individual choice. As Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate, these expectations are supported for the issue of pornography (chi-square=24.36, $p < .05$) but not for the seat-belt issue (chi-square=17.09, n.s.). That is, subjects from larger communities were more likely to say that the dominant opinion in their communities favored individual choice regarding pornography, but not the proposed mandatory seat-belt law.

The second question to be considered is whether community size is related to willingness to engage in specific forms of opinion expression. A series of 2-tailed t-tests was then performed comparing each form of expression (participating in a demonstration; wearing a pin; agreeing to a TV interview) with each other, for each issue (pornography and seat belts) within two levels of community size (large and small). The results indicate that there are fundamental differences in willingness to engage in particular forms of opinion expression regardless of perceptions of congruence with majority opinion or the nature of the issue or community size. In general, respondents were most willing to express their opinion via a television interview, next willing to wear a pin or button, and least willing to participate in a demonstration. The sole exception was that the difference between willingness to wear a pin or button and participate in a demonstration was not statistically significant among respondents from small communities. But in general, opinion expression cannot be considered to be unidimensional or monolithic.

Opinion Congruity and Expression

Consistent with Noelle-Neumann's model, it was hypothesized that greater perceived opinion congruity would be related to greater willingness to express opinions in one's hometown. The data indicate that individuals who perceived themselves as congruent with the majority opinion were more willing to express their opinion on the issue of pornography by means of participating in a demonstration ($r=.13$, $p < .05$) and by wearing a pin or button ($r=.17$, $p < .01$). For the seat belt issue, the relationship was in the predicted direction, but not statistically significant.

Relative Contributions of Community Size and Congruity on Opinion Expression

Because congruity affects willingness to express an opinion and since community size affects perceptions of opinion climates, the next analysis involved path analysis to test for direct and indirect influences on opinion expression. Three exogenous variables, community size, number of years of residence in the community, and year in school, were employed. The endogenous variable was opinion congruity, and the dependent (last exogenous) variable was opinion expression, again measured separately in terms of three modes of expression. Three approaches to the path analysis were employed. The first was to use all subjects, and the second was to conduct separate paths for residents of small communities (less than 10,000 residents) and large communities (more than 10,000 residents). This procedure permitted the examination of interactions between community size and congruity.

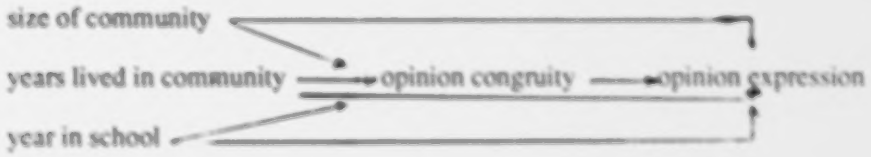
The three exogenous variables were expected to affect self expression directly, and also to affect congruity directly, and expression thus indirectly. Year in school was included since it represents exposure to the international and cosmopolitan atmosphere of the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus, which could induce in individuals the large-heterogeneous-city climate of opinion of greater individual choice and freedom. This then might directly increase willingness of self expression generally, and do so

indirectly by affecting the aspects of congruity dependent on the climate of opinion.

Years lived in the hometown was expected to have differential effects in large as opposed to small hometowns. In small towns, the longer one had lived, the more one would have been exposed to the small-town-homogeneous climate of opinion, and one would be less willing in general to express oneself. A related effect of small town atmosphere would be a greater desire to be with the majority, this creating a direct path to congruity. We had no apriori theoretical expectations of this variable in the overall sample analyses, but included it for symmetry in our models.

Hometown size, the main variable of interest, was included for essentially the same reason as year in school was. Small hometowns, with their homogeneous climates of opinion, would affect self expression directly by making it less likely, and also affect congruity directly by making siding with the majority more likely. The relative reverse was expected from larger towns.

All three analyses were conducted for each issue and for each form of opinion expression, but for ease of presentation, and since the models are recursive, all three forms of opinion expression are included in each model. The basic path diagram looks like the following:



For estimation of the standardized coefficients of the path models, we used the usual kinds of structural equations and series of multiple linear regression computations.

Considering first the overall samples, for pornography, only congruity predicts willingness to express opinions (beta=.14, $p < .05$ for participating in a demonstration;

beta=.17, p < .01for wearing a pin or button). Moreover, the directional relationship is as expected by the spiral of silence model in that one will be more likely to express oneself if one is n the majority. None of the other variables affect congruity or expression. More importantly, hometown size has no direct effect on self expression, nor does it predict congruity. This, of course, does not rule out the possibility of an interaction between hometown size and congruity. With the seat-belt issue, most path coefficients are summarily close to zero. The direct path between year in school and willingness to participate in a demonstration (among residents of large communities) is the only significant path.

The test for interactions between community size and congruity was done by segmenting the sample into residents of small versus large communities. The resulting small town sample, though not large (n=91), is sufficiently so for regressions with four variables. The lage town sample was not problematic in size (n=323). Twelve path analyses were conducted, for each issue, form of expression and hometown size.

As a comparison of Figures 1 and 2 shows, the relationship between opinion congruity and wilingness to participate in a demonstration is highly significant in the small communitysample (beta=.37, p < .01), more powerful than in the overall sample (beta=.14, p<.05) and much more so than the large community sample (beta=.06, n.s.). Similarly, the relationship between congruity and wearing a pin or button is significant in the small community sample (beta=.44, p < .01), being more predictive than than the relaionship in the overall sample (beta=.17, p<.01), and much more so than the nonsignificant large town sample path coefficient (beta=.09, n.s.). Willingness to express opinions through a TV interview was not significantly predicted by opinion congnity.

Although no other coefficients reach statistical significance, years lived in the hometown influences congruity (beta=-.17) and willingness to be interviewed on TV (beta=-.18) in the expected manner, in that the longer one has lived in a small

hometown, the more one will want to side with the majority, and the less likely one will be to express oneself. Again, though these results are not significant, they are in the expected direction. The important conclusion, however, looking at congruity, is that there is a powerful interaction effect at work: in the small community, the more one is on the majority's side, the more likely one will be to express oneself. These conclusions, moreover, do not hold for larger communities, in which a heterogeneous climate of opinion legitimizes the expression of a wider variety of opinion positions.

Looking at the seat belt models (Figures 3, 4), we see no significant interactions between perceived opinion congruity and opinion expression. Instead, there is an interaction between "year in school" and willingness to express opinions, with those individuals absent from their hometown community the longest less willing to express opinions there. Conversely, although the path coefficients are not statistically significant for the small-town sample, the opposite pattern is present; i.e., those respondents who have been absent from their (small) hometown community the longest are more willing to express opinions there.

Discussion

This study describes the application of two theoretical models of communication and public opinion to the development of a theory of public opinion as a form of social control, a social sanction that can be levied against individuals who do not conform to majority opinion. First, the data indicate that individuals do indeed perceive differences in opinion climates. These perceived differences, in turn, have implications for individuals' willingness to express opinions publicly, especially those that may be unpopular in a particular reference group. Individuals from smaller communities will be less likely to express unpopular opinions in their communities than will residents of larger, more pluralistic communities. Further, willingness to engage in particular forms of opinion expression varies, although not as a function of

community size. Finally, the nature of the issue itself influences individuals' willingness to express opinions publicly.

Larger communities, by their nature, are characterized by greater diversity of points of view. The media, in performing a feedback-control function, portray this diversity or lack of consensus through the reporting of conflict. This, in turn, provides support for individuals who hold opinions which may be incongruent with the majority, but still held by others in the community. By downplaying community conflict in smaller communities, on the other hand, the media may create the illusion of a consensus where none actually exists, or they may be faithfully reflecting the greater homogeneity of the community. In either case, the appearance of consensus inhibits expression of minority opinions to a much greater degree than in larger communities.

Noelle-Neumann's contention that "fear of isolation" is the mechanism that determines opinion expression is not fully supported with these results. The most potentially public form of expression--a TV interview--is the form of expression that is is least threatening to respondents, whereas participation in a demonstration is the most. Further, perceived opinion congruity does not significantly predict willingness to be interviewed on television, yet it does predict willingness to participate in a demonstration or to wear a pin or button for the small-community sample. This suggests that "fear of confrontation" may be a more compelling motivator than "fear of isolation", particularly on issues that arouse passions (i.e., the banning of pornography rather than the passage of a mandatory seat-belt law).

These findings suggest the importance for public relations practitioners of being sensitive to environmental pressures on conformity or at least to the reluctance of residents of smaller communities to speak against the perceived dominant opinion. Where an organization's position is congruent with the perceived majority opinion, communication efforts should actively reinforce this perception. On the other hand, in

cases in which an organization's position is incongruent with the perceived dominant opinion, it is incumbent upon the organization to disrupt the consonance of media coverage of the dominant side and to demonstrate through pseudo-events or other tactics that individuals holding the minority opinion have social support and will not be ostracized. This is the theoretical rationale for demonstrations, rallies, etc. This line of reasoning also suggests that a great deal of groundwork must be laid in terms of generating support for a candidate or issue position before staging public displays of support, particularly the types of displays of opinion that are inherently least attractive to individuals (i.e., demonstrations). To the extent that individuals feel that they have social support, they will be more likely to demonstrate their opinion publicly, thereby further strengthening the perception that their opinion is in the majority or at least gaining public support. Without prior coalition or consensus building, i.e., efforts to create a "community" or shared interest of supporters of a particular issue position, an organization risks staging a public demonstration that will fail and accelerate a losing cause.

Notes

We are grateful to Kurt Neuwirth, doctoral candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for his assistance with this paper.

References

Bernays, E. L. (1923) **Crystallizing Public Opinion**. New York: Knopf.

Bergen, L. (1986) Testing the Spiral of Silence Theory With Opinions on Abortion. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association.

Blumer, H. (1948) Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling. **American Sociological Review**, 13, 542-554.

Donohue, G.A., Tichenor, P.J. and Olien, C.N. (1973) Mass Media Functions, Knowledge and Social Control. **Journalism Quarterly**, 50, 652-659.

Edelstein, A. and J.B. Schulz (1963) The Weekly Newspaper's Leadership Role as Seen By Community Leaders." **Journalism Quarterly**, 40:565-574.

Glynn, C. and McLeod, J. (1984) Public Opinion Du Jour: An Examination of the Spiral of Silence. **Public Opinion Quarterly**, 48, 731-740.

Glynn, C. and McLeod, J. (1985) Implications of the Spiral of Silence Theory for Communication and Public Opinion Research. In K. Sanders, L.L. Kaid and D. Nimmo (eds.) **Political Communication Yearbook 1984**. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Goldner, F. (1971) Public Opinion and Survey Research: A Poor Mix. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research.

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1973) Return to the Concept of Powerful Mass Media. **Studies of Broadcasting**, 68-105.

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1974) The Spiral of Silence. **Journal of Communication**, 24,43-51.

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1977) Turbulences in the Climate of Opinion. **Public Opinion Quarterly**, 41, 113-58.

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1979) Public Opinion and the Classical Tradition. **Public Opinion Quarterly**, 43, 143-156.

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1981) Mass Media and Social Change in Developed Societies. In E. Katz and T. Szecsko (eds.) **Mass Media and Social Change**. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1984) **The Spiral of Silence**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Olien, C.N., Donohue, G.A. and Tichenor, P.J. (1968) The Community Editor's Power and the Reporting of Conflict. **Journalism Quarterly**, 45, 243-252.

Pavlik, J.V. and Salmon, C.T. (1984) Theoretic Approaches in Public Relations Research. **Public Relations Research & Education**, 1(2), 39-49.

Rucinski, D., Lee, H.R. and Salmon, C.T. (1987) Audience Perceptions of Media Consonance. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research.

Salmon, C.T. and Kline, F.G. (1985) The Spiral of Silence Ten Years Later: An Examination and Evaluation. In K. Sanders, L.L. Kaid and D. Nimmo (eds.) **Political Communication Yearbook 1984.** Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Salmon, C.T. and Neuwirth, K. (1987) A Multivariate Test of the Spiral of Silence Hypothesis. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

Salmon, C.T. and Rucinski, D. (1988) Fear of Isolation From Whom? Environmental Cues and Willingness to Express Opinions on Controversial Issues. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association.

Tichenor, P.J., Donohue, G.A. and Olien, C.N. (1973) Mass Communication Research: Evolution of a Structural Model. **Journalism Quarterly**, 50, 419-425.

Tichenor, P.J., Donohue, G.A. and Olien, C.N. (1980) **Community Conflict and the Press**. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Vidich, A.J. and Bensman, J. (1968) **Small Town in Mass Society**. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

TABLE 1: Crosstabulation of Hometown Residents' Opinion by Community Size on the Issue of Regulating Pornography Availability

Hometown Residents' Opinion on Porn. Availability	Column %	Community Size (in thousands) 0-10	10-40	40-100	100+
no regulation	1	2.2	3.2	3.2	5.5
	2	8.8	15.9	18.5	30.1
	3	23.1	24.6	33.1	31.5
	4	51.9	43.6	37.1	24.7
banning	5	14.3	12.7	8.1	8.2
		100% (n=91)	100% (n=126)	100% (n=124)	100% (n=73)

Total n=414

Chi-Square = 24.36* Pearson's r = -.22**

* = p<.05 ** = p<.01

TABLE 2: Crosstabulation of Hometown Residents' Opinion by Community Size on the Issue of Mandatory Seat Belt Use

Hometown Residents' Opinion on Mandatory Seat Belt Use	Column %	Community Size (in thousands) 0-10	10-40	40-100	100+
opposed	1	17.6	28.0	22.9	13.7
	2	35.1	39.2	40.2	46.6
	3	18.7	15.2	17.2	23.3
	4	22.0	13.6	16.4	13.7
in favor	5	6.6	4.0	3.3	2.7
		100% (n=91)	100% (n=126)	100% (n=124)	100% (n=73)

Total n=411

Chi-Square = 17.09 Pearson's r = -.04

* = p<.05 ** = p<.01

FIGURE 1: Path Analysis for the Small Hometown Sample on the Issue of Pornography Regulation

n=91

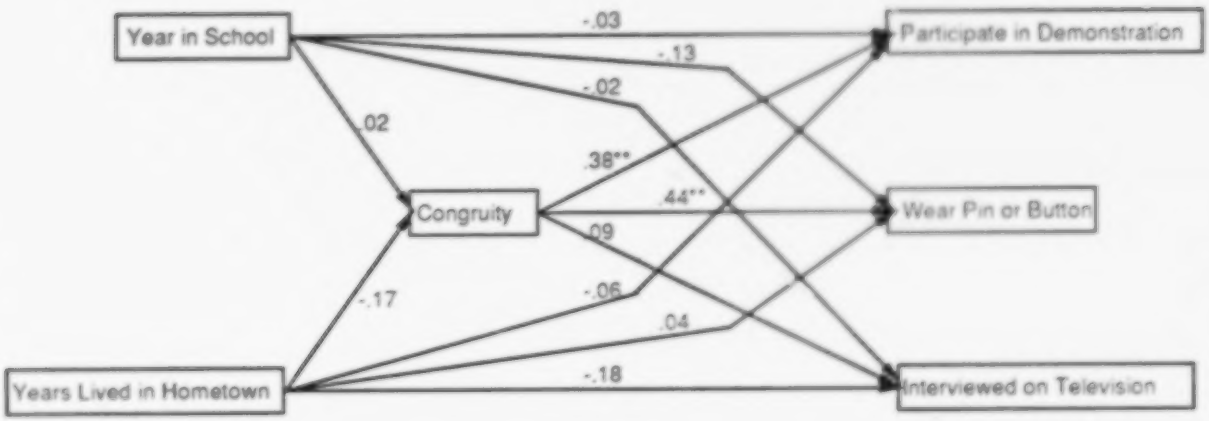
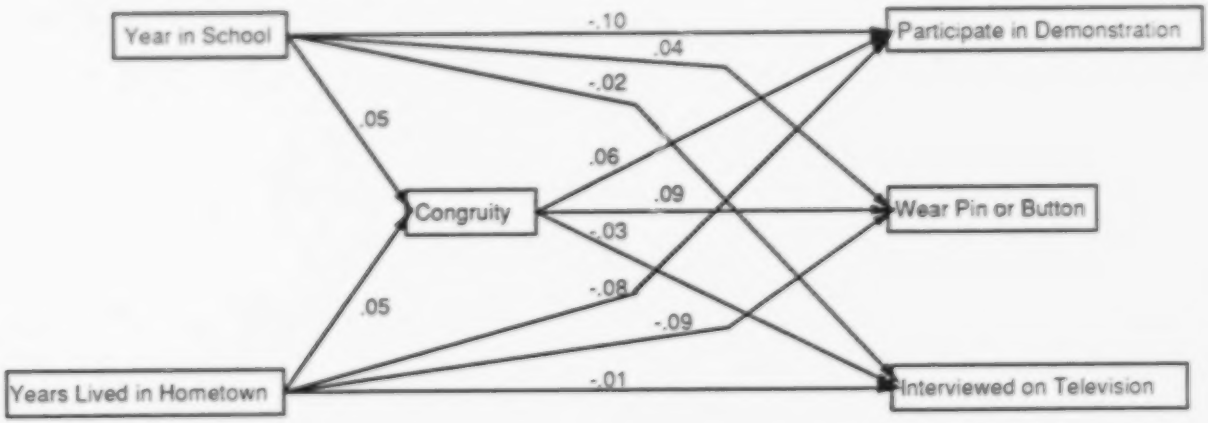


FIGURE 2: Path Analysis for the Large Hometown Sample on the Issue of Pornography Regulation

n=323



* = p<.05 , ** = p<.01

FIGURE 3: Path Analysis for the Small Hometown Sample on the Issue of Mandatory Seat Belt Use

n=91

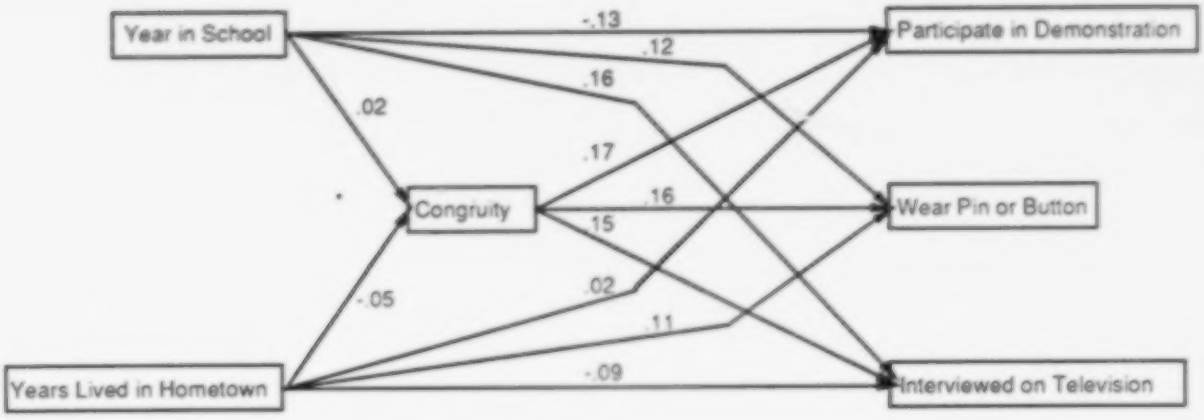
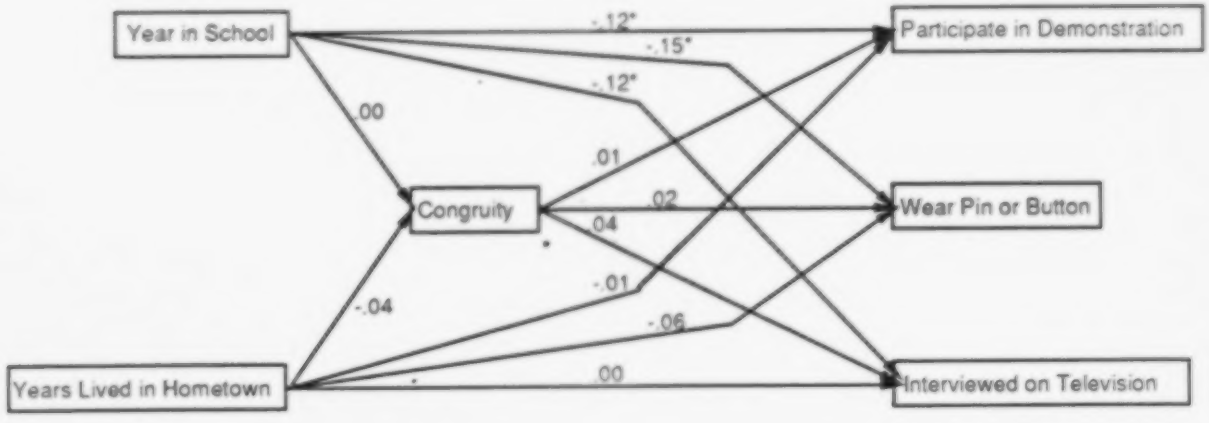


FIGURE 4: Path Analysis for the Large Hometown Sample on the Issue of Mandatory Seat Belt Use

n=323



* = p<.05, ** = p<.01